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By Nick Maheras, STAFF WRITER

Controversy continues to swirl around a congressman's remarks last week concerning Japanese-American internment.

Last Tuesday on "Murphy in the Morning," WKZL-FM's morning radio talk show, Congressman Howard Coble said he agreed with Franklin D. Roosevelt's decision to intern Japanese-Americans during World War II. Coble, R-6th, had rejected a caller's suggestion that all Arabs in the United States be imprisoned, but then said he believed FDR did the right thing at the time and under the circumstances.

Later, Coble said Japanese-Americans were interned as much for their own protection as for national security considerations. The congressman also said some Arabs in the United States probably intend harm to America, just as some Japanese in the United States must have during World War II.

That drew protests from Japanese-American, Asian-American, Muslim and Arab-American groups.

Three Asian-American congressmen, Rep. Mike Honda, D-Calif., Rep. Robert Matsui, D-Calif., and Rep. David Wu, D-Ore., sent a letter to Coble on Friday requesting a meeting to discuss his comments.

"In order for us to better understand your views ... , and so that you may better understand our concerns for the appropriate balance of homeland security and constitutional civil rights, we would like to meet with you next week," Honda wrote. "Time is of the essence based on the very serious nature of the comments."

Coble recently was named chairman of the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism and Homeland Security.

Missy Branson, Coble's chief of staff, on Monday said a meeting had not been set up.

"We have sent a letter to them in response," she said. "We're hoping that will clarify any outstanding questions they might have ... or answer their questions."

The congressman also issued a statement Monday regretting that many Japanese and Arab-Americans found his comments offensive.

Though Coble still maintains that FDR made the best decision he could at the time, he indicated he no longer agrees with it.

"Today, we can certainly look back and see the damage that was caused because of this decision," Coble wrote. "We all now know that this was, in fact, the wrong decision and an action that should never be repeated."

The day after Coble made his remarks on the radio show, Honda sponsored a resolution in the House to designate Feb. 19 a National Day of Remembrance to boost public awareness of the internment. On Feb. 19, 1942, Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 restricting the freedom of Japanese-Americans, German-American and Italian-Americans.

Ruben Pulido, Honda's communications director, said the California congressman had decided to introduce the resolution before the controversy arose. Pulido said 52 other U.S. representatives also committed to co-sponsor the resolution.

"Rep. Honda was already planning to introduce the resolution on Feb. 5," Pulido said. "On that same day, to his astonishment, he heard about Rep. Coble's remarks."

As of Monday, Pulido said no similar resolution has been introduced in the U.S. Senate. The resolution does not mention Coble.

House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi also issued a statement condemning Coble's internment comments.

"His remarks demonstrated an appalling disregard for civil liberties and (an) inexcusable ignorance of history," she wrote. "History has shown that this action, as well as restrictions on Americans of German and Italian ancestry, was not only wrong, it was indefensible.

"I hope members on both sides of the aisle will join us in co-sponsoring this (Honda's) resolution."

Branson said she doesn't see why the congressman would have a problem supporting the resolution.

She added that the congressman's Washington office had definitely received more telephone calls and correspondence since the internment controversy emerged.

Jan Scott, community liaison for Coble's Greensboro office, said that office received more than 60 calls on the matter.

"That's a lot of calls," she said. "They're all in support of Howard. Maybe one call (was) against him."

Nick Maheras can be contacted at 888-3534 or nmaheras@hpe.com
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